



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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AYRSHIRE NATURE-LORE & HANDICRAFTS CLASSES.

BY M. A. CLAPPERTON.

HOLIDAY courses are so common now in this country that in ordinary circumstances a new one would be hardly worthy of mention. The Nature-Lore and Handicrafts Classes held in the month of August at the little village of Darvel, Ayrshire, seem to me, however, of a rather unusual type.

It is not that the subjects were new. Sloyd we know, and clay-modelling and wood-carving and brush-work. They are becoming quite familiar friends; and nature-lore might be taken to mean botany and natural history, though, as a matter of fact, it does not entirely correspond to these.

It is not that the work was entirely done with the hands, thus affording a rest for tired brains. Much less was this summer school a course of lectures which were duly noted down and possibly never thought of again.

No! every member of the school carried away with him or her a definite, positive possession, or rather it would be nearer the truth to say that no one left this summer school quite the same person as he entered it.

If I were asked to characterise the training here, I should say its chief value lay in this—that it was a means of self-revelation. The ruling idea seemed to be to put the scholar in possession of his own powers and possibilities, to help him to express freely and satisfactorily the thought that was in him.

To this end nature-lore was made the central study, and all the other subjects were more or less viewed and treated in relation to it. By means of rambles over the country-side, and on the sea-shore, talks on trees, plants, common animals, birds, etc. (made living by observation of great numbers of specimens, viewed wherever possible, in their natural surroundings and in life), the attempt was made to help the student to enter into a direct relation with nature. Then he was encouraged to reproduce with his brush some natural object that had struck him, a leaf, a simple flower, a shell, a fungus.

To the individual who is unfortunate enough to have been

born a few decades ago, and has perhaps never held a brush in his hand, the command to make a brush-drawing seems as cruel as Pharaoh's oppressive demands on the Israelites, and as impossible of fulfilment. But here no one might refuse to make the effort, and behold, to one's amazement, one discovered that one *could* produce some representation of what was before one. The colours were crude, the drawing probably very faulty, but there was usually, even in the first sketches, that intangible something that is characteristic of the particular object represented. And even where the representation was altogether faulty and the teacher could find nothing to commend, a rare case in this school, the pupil had certainly gained something by the effort. His power of observation had to some extent been quickened. Then as time went on and hints were given and direction, by the practised mistress of the art who conducted this and all the classes here, and as one practised day after day for a month, one became more and more fascinated, one attempted bolder flights and more difficult "plant gestures," and one felt unmistakeably that a new world had been opened up; new possibilities revealed to oneself.

Then the clay modelling was an exquisite delight. To sit down with your lump of shapeless clay and before you a lovely fresh beech leaf which you were required to reproduce in the plastic material, and to wonder vaguely but hopefully how it was to be done (this, too, after a full course of lessons in modelling geometric forms); and then to be initiated into the use of your thumbs and fingers; to gradually discover the possibilities for representation of graceful outline, and inequality of surface, and light and shade, that were latent in that apparently lifeless material, and could be evolved by deft touches with fingers and thumbs and a few simple tools, till the beautiful nature form stood forth, giving you double joy because it was actually the creation of your own hands and you knew that you could produce other forms of beauty to all eternity; this was joy indeed. Not that you were satisfied with this or any other of your attempts—far from it. But you felt, possibly for the first time, that you, too, could satisfy that innate desire of humanity to *create* something.

I need not take up the other subjects in detail but shall merely say that leather-embossing, wood-carving, and brass-

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work were all taught on lines similar to those I have indicated, and as closely as possible related to living nature. Sloyd and book-binding and basket-making are necessarily more mechanical and do not lend themselves to the same treatment. They sandwiched in exceedingly well with the other subjects, however, and gave variety to the course while affording valuable training in accuracy.

Just a word as to the heredity of this summer course, as it is rather unusual. The originator of the scheme was a young manufacturer whose father has created in this Ayrshire valley an important industry, employing over a thousand persons. The work is of such a kind as to demand artistic power in designing, and the heads of the factory have always tried to avail themselves of the best talent that was to be had, and have thus produced beautiful goods which take a high place in the market.

This junior member of the firm had recently to plan a suitable education for his own young children, and in the course of his investigations into existing systems, he found the kind of training that most nearly corresponded to his ideal in the House of Education, Ambleside. Not content with securing the benefits of skilled teaching for his own family, he has shared these benefits with the children of the village, and he finally arranged for this summer course to be conducted by the lady who has charge of the nature-lore department at Ambleside. The students here, in Darvel, were not all teachers. There were young men and women workers from the mill, designers and weavers, and there was a very pleasant spirit of good fellowship which added very much to the attractiveness of the work.

There was, I think, a general feeling of satisfaction on the part of the students, and the teacher has expressed her satisfaction, as well as her surprise at the excellent quality of much of the work done. But to my mind the chief value of the teaching lies in its inspiring and stimulating force. No sensible person will imagine that in four or five weeks, perfection can be dreamed of in any of the subjects taught, but a beginning can be made and well made on sound lines, leaving future development to the students' own initiative.

To some jaded teachers, and other victims of routine, this course proved a most restful and refreshing kind of holiday.